

Tuesday, January 10, 1995-- First Organizational Day

SPEAKER'S REMARKS

Speaker Pro-Tem Deberry, Majority Leader Purcell, Minority Leader Bittle, Mr. Chairman Bragg, and Mr. Chairman Rhinehart, our most senior members. To all my most distinguished colleagues from both parties who were re-elected and helped lead this house over the years. And to those who are in this great institution today for the first time. To my family and friends and your families and friends.

I appreciate more than I can express the confidence you have shown in electing me your Speaker again. In return for this confidence, I renew my pledge to conduct the business of the house as fairly, and as honestly and efficiently as I am able. It makes no difference whether you are a committee chairman or a freshman, my door will always be open to any member of this house who has a question or a concern.

Today begins a new era for the Tennessee House of Representatives. The last eight years were marked by a period of historic cooperation between the House and a Governor who was a former member of this body. It was a relationship that combined a governor with common sense vision and a House that was ready to put aside partisanship for the good of the state. The result of this cooperation was a period of progress in education, in health care, in corrections and in economic development that our children will read about as one of the most successful in Tennessee's 200 year history.

In ten days, we will have a new governor who represents a different political party. Doubtless there are many Tennesseans who wonder what this change will mean for the relationship between this House and the Executive Branch.

As Speaker of this House, I pledge to Governor-elect Sundquist that I will cooperate in any way possible to make sure we maintain the tremendous progress we are enjoying today in Tennessee. Bipartisan cooperation served Tennessee well under a Democratic governor, and it can serve the same ends with a Republican governor.

This does not, of course, suggest that the Democrats plan to spend the next four years sitting on the sideline. As we seek to work with the administration on its priorities, Democrats also will have legislative priorities.

First and foremost, the Finance Committee will seek to protect Tennessee's reputation as the best managed state government in America. Our economy is one of the strongest, our taxes are the lowest, our unemployment is at record low and the rise in personal income is the highest in this nation. The size of state government has declined over the last eight years. Budgets have been balanced, and all new proposals, including those in corrections, have been required to provide first-year funding. These are conservative policies that are responsible for Tennessee's reputation, and to which I am committed.

The Democrats will join Governor-elect Sundquist in his opposition to any new taxes, including other items, such as fees, that are only taxes in disguise.

In the area of education, Democrats and Republicans from the Education Committee stood together in this chamber to pass one of the most comprehensive education reform plans in America. The first three years of the 21st Century Schools Program have made an enormous difference in dozens of the communities represented in this house. We are three years into a six-year commitment to fund this program, and we should not compromise one dollar of this commitment until it is fully funded.

There is a final issue important to the Democrats in this chamber and I am sure to the Republicans as well. Those of you who were here last year recall that the house passed ethics legislation intended to be an important first step toward the goal of campaign reform. For reasons that are unclear, the Senate adjourned before voting on these reforms.

The Governor-elect stated last week that he would like to see improvements in Tennessee's campaign laws. In a gesture that I hope will establish a good relationship between the House and the Executive Branch, I am today reaching out to Governor-elect Sundquist and offering to work with the administration to develop practical, meaningful ethics legislation.

I do not see this effort as my bill, or a Democratic bill or a Republican bill. Instead, I would view it as an effort of cooperation between the administration and the House Ethics Committee to regain the public's trust in the political process.

I close with a brief word to the twenty-five ladies and gentlemen who begin their service today. I'm excited for you, because I remember what it was like back in 1975 when I took that oath for the first time.

On your first day, I'll take the privilege as speaker to share some simple advice. Be serious, but don't take yourself too seriously. When in doubt, follow your instincts. If you have a family, call them every night. And never, ever, think that any person or any political party is more important than the people we're here to serve. I welcome you to the greatest experience of your life. Thank you.